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# ANALYSIS

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MORAL SUBJECTIVISM:  
REPLY TO PROFESSOR ACTON

By A. C. EWING

PROFESSOR ACTON'S article<sup>1</sup> in criticism of a passage in my book on *The Definition of Good* certainly shows a very acute analytical and dialectical power, and it may very well be that I did not elaborate my argument sufficiently in combating the subjectivist position. It must be remembered, however, that what I was discussing in the passages quoted was not the view that the only element in ethical judgements which could be known or rightly believed to be true was a judgement about the speaker's feelings. I was discussing there what ethical statements mean and not whether what is meant is true. Now I do not see who can be the ultimate judge of what he means but the person who uses the words himself. I should admit that the first formula one is inclined to accept as conveying one's meaning may not necessarily do so and that there are senses in which one may be unaware even of one's own meaning; but I do not see how I can ever be justified in accepting an analysis as giving my meaning unless on introspection I find myself feeling something like this about the analysis: "Ah, this is what I really meant all along, only I did not put it so well". It may really give my meaning even if I do not feel like this, but I am not entitled to accept it till I do. Further, if a formula is offered in regard to which we have a clear conviction that it does not represent what we mean after careful reflection and after making sure that we understand the formula, we are surely justified in rejecting it. We may be fallible in this as in other matters, but even a sceptic about metaphysics should admit that we are at least less fallible as regards this than we are about most things. Our meaning is a question not of a priori intuition but of ordinary introspection, for what we 'mean' is what we intend to assert. And, even if we are often mistaken as to our ulterior motives, surely we can in general know our present intentions. I do not see how on earth I can decide what I mean except by looking into my mind, and I constantly do so whenever I am asked to explain myself. If I cannot decide it myself, certainly nobody else can decide it for me, though they may advance points which influence my decision. Nor do I see how any consideration of the occasions on which we use words could settle the question without the introspective reference of which I have spoken. The difference

<sup>1</sup> ANALYSIS, Vol. IX, no. 1, l. 1.

between the subjectivist and his opponent is a difference compatible with agreement as to the external occasions on which ethical words are used, and therefore could not possibly be settled one way or the other by referring to these occasions. What I was doing was giving a series of considerations which help me and I hoped would help others to see that the subjectivist account of ethical meaning was false, but the last court of appeal must be one's own observation of what one does mean. I suggest that subjectivists and naturalists go wrong because in this respect they are not empirical enough: they try to deduce what we must mean from preconceived theories rather than from the observation of what we actually experience when we make ethical decisions. I cannot for the life of me imagine that they would arrive at the conclusions they do arrive at if they based them on an empirical observation of what goes on in their own minds when they make ethical judgements, unless indeed their minds are fundamentally different in structure from mine, which I think very unlikely.

That this does not finally settle the issue against the subjectivist I am well aware. It is still open to the latter to admit a non-subjectivist theory to be correct as an account of the meaning of ethical statements but to deny that any extra elements in it over and above what is given in the subjectivist analysis are true. This view is quite incredible to me, but it could not be shown false by any arguments I have given unless we assume, as we well may, that the fact that something is a commonsense proposition is an argument for its being substantially (not, necessarily, exactly) true. But even subjectivists are usually loth to admit that our ethical judgements are all seriously false, so they either prefer to maintain that their account represents what the plain man meant all the time, or leave the matter obscure. The word 'analysis' in fact may well cover up dangerous obscurities. I have been thinking of 'analysis' in Prof. Moore's sense, which implies that to give an analysis of a common-sense proposition is to give the exact meaning of the common-sense statement expressing the proposition; but the term is often used in a looser sense in which it means rather giving what the person who puts forward the analysis thinks to be the true proposition most like the common-sense proposition, which he thinks cannot be true as it stands. I was not discussing 'analysis' in this sense.

Let us now turn to my particular arguments and Prof. Acton's objections:

(1) I argued that, if the subjectivist analysis were correct, ethical judgements could not be false unless the person who

judged had made a mistake about his own psychology. My difficulty here was not caused by the supposition that introspective judgements cannot be false. What I was contending was that it is perfectly sensible for me to say that an ethical judgement I made was wrong and yet to admit that my feelings and tendencies to feel at the time were what I thought them to be. If ethical judgements of mine only asserted that I had certain feelings (and tendencies to feel) towards some particular object, this assertion would be self-contradictory. I do not see that this is the same as argument VI. Argument I claims to show that my ethical judgements cannot be judgements only about my feelings because they may be false in cases in which the judgements about my feelings to which the subjectivist reduces them are true; argument VI claims to establish the same conclusion by the different course of pointing to something else positive which they are about.

(2) I argued that, if the subjectivist account were correct, two different people would never mean the same thing when they made an ethical judgement nor would even the same person when he made it at different times. Prof. Acton replies that in a similar way 'I' never means the same thing to two different people, and concludes that the issue could be settled only by an examination of whether and how 'good' differs from such words as 'I' and 'now' and resembles such words as 'round' and 'square'. Now there is surely one very obvious difference between the case of 'good' and the case of 'I' or 'now'. In the case of 'I' and 'now' nobody but a very young child or a feeble-minded person is confused by the usage so as to think that "I am now ill" means the same if said by one man as it does if said by another or by the same man at a different time, yet people do generally hold the corresponding belief about 'good'. This difference surely calls for an explanation from the subjectivist. But, further, we must all the time remember that what we are discussing is what people *mean* by 'good'. Now what I mean by a word is what I *intend to assert* when I use that word, and since the belief to which I have referred must surely be admitted to be by far the most usual one in ethical thought and discussion at the commonsense level, it is surely difficult to deny that, when people use 'good' of something, they are generally intending to make the same assertion as they made on any previous occasion when they applied it to the same thing. The subjectivist contradicts this, and so I conclude that his cannot be a correct account of what is meant. It is irrelevant here to say that the people who thus use ethical words may be

confused; it would indeed be relevant if we were discussing whether what they meant was true, but at any rate, whether confused or not, they mean it. A common-sense belief might be wrong and even self-contradictory, but it still would be a common-sense belief. The subjectivist must not suppose that people do not mean what they think they mean merely because they disagree philosophically with the subjectivist.

(3) I objected that, if the subjectivist analysis were right, judgements made by different people about what is good could never be incompatible with each other. Prof. Acton admits that this follows from subjectivism but says that the only way of showing if the judgements really are incompatible would be by specific examples. I should have thought that every ethical judgement anyone makes would be an example, because one could always conceive an ethical judgement made by somebody else contradicting it and doing so without having any reference to one's own feelings. Prof. Acton suggests that there might be a special kind of ethical contradiction distinct from logical contradiction and supports this by a remark in the last paragraph of the article which shows a serious misunderstanding of my position. He says that in rejecting naturalism I have granted "that ethical judgements are in quite a different category from judgements of fact",<sup>1</sup> but I have not done anything of the kind. I have claimed only that they assert facts of a different kind from the facts of the natural sciences, which is not the same as saying that they are not judgements of fact at all. But even if I had admitted that they were not, the remark would be irrelevant here as a defence of the subjectivist analysis, because I was criticising a view which did admit them to be judgements of fact. The form of subjectivism which I was explicitly discussing, in the passages with which Prof. Acton deals, was the form according to which they are judgements of psychological fact about the speaker, not the form according to which they are mere expressions of attitude which could not be true or false, like exclamations or commands, as opposed to statements of fact. A person who holds this form of subjectivism obviously could not plead in its defence that ethical judgements are not capable of being brought under the ordinary categories of logic such as contradiction, error, etc., because they are not judgements of fact. And, again, we cannot get away from the fact that, when making the judgement "this is good", we normally intend to contradict the judgement "this is not good", not as an indirect inference from the first judgement which might be

<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.* p. 8.



challenged, but as part of the very meaning of it. Since the meaning of something just is what we intend to assert by it, this simple fact seems to me quite incompatible with a subjectivist analysis in the straight forward sense of 'analysis'.

(4) I argued that, if the subjectivist analysis were correct, no argument or citation of empirical facts would ever cast doubt on any ethical judgement unless it supported the view that the person judging had made a mistake about his feelings or tendencies to feel, although it might indeed have the effect of altering his feelings and so leading to a different judgement which appeared verbally to contradict the earlier one but did not really do so because it related to a different time. In reply to my objection Prof. Acton here seems to overreach himself. He defends the subjectivist theory that it is not really a question of casting doubt on the same judgement by suggesting that, if I change my view about the goodness of A as the result of new information (or, I suppose, argument), then I am no longer judging about the same A but about A in the light of the new information or argument. But this, if valid, would apply to all judgements and not only to those in the sphere of ethics. If, as I think, Prof. Acton would agree with me that to apply the subjectivist view to all judgements would be quite silly, I do not see how he can use this argument to support the subjectivist view in ethics. In the sense of 'the same' in which the phrase is used in other cases where we change our opinion the judgements are the same, unless indeed ethical judgements are not judgements at all in the ordinary sense of 'judgement', and that is not the position I was discussing. But, if the point were insisted on, it would result only in another incredible paradox, namely, that ethical judgements are never wrong at all, because the judgement is always "this, as it appears to me now, is good", and, even if I am mistaken about my psychology, I can hardly think that something appears to me good when it does not so appear. If I think that it is good it still may not be good, but if I think that it *appears* to me good it surely must so *appear*.

(5) Let us state this argument in relation to a concrete case. Suppose somebody I disliked had voluntarily done something that was gravely detrimental to my interests. It is quite likely that I should be certain that I felt strong ethical disapproval or at the least that I had a tendency to do so, and yet it is quite possible that I might still be fair-minded enough to have doubts as to whether the disapproval was justified. This attitude would be senseless if to say that something is bad just meant that I felt disapproval of it. I admit that the subjectivist view would

not imply that ethical mistakes are impossible since we can make mistakes in introspection ; but it does imply that, though I may make mistakes as to whether I have a feeling of approval or disapproval, the feeling itself cannot lead me astray. I am not infallible in my ethical judgements on this view, but I am in my ethical feelings. This I deny ; ethical feelings, as well as judgements, may be bad guides. They may in fact be only the residuum of mistaken judgements in the past, as the disapproval a man brought up on very sabbatarian lines might still feel when he played or saw other people playing games on Sunday, even though he no longer counted the feeling justified.

(6) I criticised subjectivism on the ground that it implied that, when we were judging that, *e.g.*, Hitler was bad, we were really only talking about our own psychology. Prof. Acton replies that even to make a judgement about our feelings towards Hitler is not to make a judgement merely about our feelings but about Hitler also. Now of course a philosopher may use 'about' in a sense in which a judgement about A is also a judgement about anything connected with A, in which case every judgement we make is about everything. But this must be distinguished from the ordinary sense of 'about'. Of course if I say that I have certain feelings towards a man who knows nothing of me or even only that I am *e.g.* 500 miles distant from him, I am in a sense giving new information about him, *i.e.* I am ascribing to him new relational properties. But this does not make the judgement one about him in the ordinary sense of 'about'. My argument thus still stands, though it might be made clearer by altering the term 'about' to 'primarily about'. The difference may be put in this way : from the subjectivist view it would follow that the judgement made by me that Hitler was bad might have been false without there having been any difference in Hitler himself excepting the absence of the relational property of evoking certain feelings in me (an unimportant relation enough for him !); on an objectivist view this could not have been so.

Let me now close by reminding the reader (1) that I am perfectly aware that there are a number of more sophisticated varieties of the subjectivist position, which I discuss later in my book but which were ignored in the passages that Prof. Acton has criticised ; (2) that, even if the subjectivist position did escape all the arguments discussed in this article, it would still as a variety of naturalism have to face other arguments brought against all forms of naturalism in my book. These arguments, I think, would also apply to any view such as Prof. Acton's



probably is, which only objects to the subjectivist view on the ground that the approval involved in ethical judgement is not merely personal but refers to people in general.

## THE LOGICAL STATUS OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>

By STEPHEN TOULMIN

PHILOSOPHY has always flourished on half-fledged sciences. The great periods in the history of Western Philosophy have been periods in which new modes of thought and new ways of reasoning were being developed, and their history is at least partly a record of the teething-troubles of these new instruments. As long as new ideas remain unfamiliar, their scope and nature tend to be misunderstood, and their use hampered by misplaced and fruitless controversy. At the best, the result is Descartes; but a great deal of the more transitory kind of philosophy trades on these misunderstandings, and satisfies the public taste for conjuring, mystification and paradox by a fine display of technicalities, which on closer examination are found simply to sugar-coat a series of dotty answers to screwy questions. In the past this has happened chiefly to physics and biology, but nowadays the main victim is psycho-analysis. Although it is fifty years since Freud's pioneer work, and although psycho-analytic techniques are in regular therapeutic use, the position of psycho-analysis as an intellectual discipline is still not established. It may therefore be prudent for once to enquire how far the mystery surrounding the subject comes from a desire to ask the wrong questions about it, and how far a better understanding of the nature and logic of psycho-analysis will, by itself, dispel the fog.

From the way in which popularisers of psycho-analysis, many psycho-analysts, and even Freud himself, have talked and written, one gets a very confused idea of psycho-analytic procedure, and consequently (as I want to shew) a distorted picture of the implications of psycho-analytic discoveries for philosophy and for our everyday lives. To begin with, Freud's discovery is presented to us as a double one. First, it is suggested, he discovered the 'unconscious mind', in a way strictly comparable to Columbus' discovery of America or Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood. And then, we are given

<sup>1</sup> The substance of this paper was delivered as a report to the Tenth International Congress of Philosophy, Amsterdam, on August 16th, 1948.

to understand, Freud *also* discovered that, by revealing to the mentally-ill the contents of their unconscious minds, he could often cure them of their distresses. Taking the portmanteau notion of 'discovery' at its face-value, we are at once amazed, mystified and, after a little reflection, dismayed. We are amazed that any man should have the genius to make *two* such discoveries; we are mystified both by the very notion of an 'unconscious mind' and by the strange and apparently arbitrary fact that a revelation of its contents is often enough to relieve mental illness; and, finally, we are dismayed because the discovery seems bound to destroy our few remaining shreds of belief in free-will, having drawn back the last, kindly veil which up to now had hidden from us the inexorable machinery of cause-and-effect governing what we had liked to call our own, 'personal' decisions.

"What *kind* of thing is the 'unconscious mind'?", "Can an analyst really discover the *causes* of mental illness?", "If that is what he claims to do, are not the 'explanations' he gives often highly speculative?", "Further, how can he in some cases 'explain' neuroses in terms of 'traumatic experiences' which never in fact occurred?", "Finally—and this in some ways is the most mysterious question of all—how on earth is it that the revelation of the 'unconscious mind' can *cure* neuroses at all?": such questions prompt themselves insistently, and the answers generally given are of little assistance. Take the last as an illustration. Why do psycho-analytic cures work at all? And are they better in principle than drugs, or hypnotic suggestion? No, say the sceptics, just a mixture of flukes and common sense. Yes, says Freud, but proceeds to give this flowery and metaphorical explanation of *why* they are better:

Painting, says Leonardo, works *per via di porre*, for it applies a substance—particles of colour—where there was nothing before, on the colourless canvas; sculpture, however, proceeds *per via di levare*, since it takes away from the rough stone all that hides the surface of the statue contained in it. The technique of suggestion aims in a similar way at proceeding *per via di porre*; it is not concerned with the origin, strength and meaning of the morbid symptoms, but instead, it superimposes something—a suggestion—and expects this to be strong enough to restrain the pathogenic idea from coming to expression. Analytic therapy, on the other hand, does not seek to add or to introduce anything new, but to take away something, to bring out something; and to this end concerns itself with the genesis of the morbid symptoms and the psychical

context of the pathogenic idea which it seeks to remove . . . Besides all this, I have another reproach against (suggestion), namely, that it conceals from us all insight into the play of mental forces".<sup>1</sup>

The metaphor Freud chooses for his 'explanation' is particularly unfortunate. It could hardly be said that a given block of stone 'contained' only *one* statue, so we are left with the apparently arbitrary nature of analytic psycho-therapy still unexplained.

In this paper, I want to suggest that our troubles arise from thinking of psycho-analysis too much on the analogy of the natural sciences. I shall point out that (ethics and religion apart) we are accustomed to giving several logically distinct types of explanation of human conduct; and that the decision, which type of explanation is appropriate in any particular situation, depends upon our purpose in asking for an 'explanation'. In order to achieve a balanced view of psycho-analysis, it is necessary to compare psycho-analytic explanation with at least *three* of these more familiar types. When this is done, the very features of psycho-analysis which are apt to appear most puzzling become intelligible; and the scope and status of the subject become clearer.

Consider three logically distinct types of 'explanation' of human conduct:

E1, the 'stated reason' which one gives oneself, in reply to the question, "Why did you do that?"—e.g. "Because it's time for bed and I want to go home".

E2, the 'reported reason' to which one refers in answering the question, "Why did he do that?", asked of a third person—e.g. "Because it's time for bed and he wants to go home".

E3, the 'causal explanation' which one can sometimes give of an action—one's own or somebody else's—e.g. "Because he was given an injection of cocaine twenty minutes ago".

These three types of 'explanation' are logically related to three distinct forms of speech—to the 'psychological signal' S1 (e.g. "I am in pain"), to the 'psychological report' S2 (e.g. "He is in pain"), and to the 'statement of material fact' S3 (e.g. "They went to the cinema"). The logical distinctions between these three classes are as follows. Over S1 and E1, there is no question of 'giving one's evidence' or of 'making a mistake': if I call out, "I want you to come here", it makes no sense for you to ask, "How do you know?" or "Are you

<sup>1</sup> See "On Psychotherapy" (1904), in Freud's *Collected Papers*, Vol. I, p. 254: the notion of 'mental forces' is one to which I shall have to return at the very end of this paper.

sure?", for I might as well have said, "Come here!", or have waved to you to come—indeed, I must at one time or another have learnt to use all these three as methods of summoning people. Over S2 and E2, it makes sense to talk of 'evidence', and of 'mistakes'; but what the person himself says constitutes conclusive evidence. Over S3 and E3, one can again talk of 'mistakes' and of 'evidence', but the evidence is now a matter of factual observations neutral between all observers, including the person under discussion.<sup>1</sup>

Although a logical distinction can be drawn between the first-person present indicative 'signal' ("I want a drink") and the 'psychological report' ("He wants a drink"), they are united *in use*, firstly, by the kinds of situation in which they are appropriate and, secondly, by the purposes they normally serve. For instance, the statement "X wants a drink" finds its normal use in situations where, if X is given a drink, X will accept it with satisfaction: this holds good whether X be 'I' or 'he', whether the statement be a 'signal' or a 'report'. The same considerations apply to the stated and reported reasons for an action. And it is this which makes us want to say that the use of the signal expresses the 'same' thing about oneself that others express by the use of the report.

It is important to remark at this stage on the connection between the notion of a 'reason' or 'motive' for an action and that of 'satisfaction'. When considering what practical account we ought to take of a man's actions, we do not need a full causal analysis—even if one could be given: it is a knowledge of his motives, his reasons—the wishes behind his actions—that we need. It is, indeed, to play a part in this job that the forms of speech I have called 'psychological signals and reports' are introduced and must be understood.

Consider next the relation between 'psycho-analytic explanation' and our three simpler types of explanation, E1 to E3. In everyday situations of several different kinds, we find it natural to describe or explain people's conduct (even our own) in ways which are of interest to a psycho-analyst. (Remember Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*). These accounts may bear a resemblance to any of the three types of explanation discussed so far: logically speaking, they may be regarded as intermediate between E1, E2 and E3 and the typical psycho-analytic explanation, which may be called E4. For instance, one may say

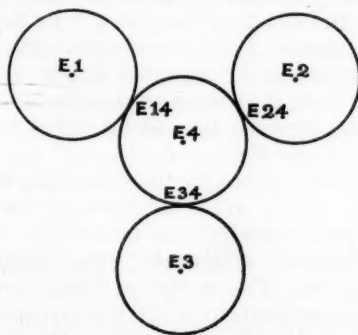
<sup>1</sup> The difference between S1 and S3 is the difference between "I am going to give you a good hiding" and "I am going to be sick",

E14, "I found myself wishing that I was alone with her": this is a 'signal' as much as S1 or E1, for there is no question of 'giving evidence' or 'making mistakes'—in fact the description given in such cases seems to be uniquely appropriate.

E24, "He behaved for the moment as though he hated the sight of her": this is the corresponding type of 'report' but, significantly, what the person himself says is now less conclusive as evidence than in the case of E2.

E34, "He behaves like that because his father used to beat him violently as a child": this is a genuinely 'causal' explanation if the evidence considered as relevant is (i) a correlation between a cruel upbringing and subsequent behaviour of this type and (ii) the fact that he actually was beaten violently when young.

None of these three explanations (E14, E24, E34) is, strictly speaking, a 'psycho-analytic' one, but each is of more interest to an analyst than the corresponding simple explanation, E1, E2 or E3. It is suggestive to display the logical characteristics of the different types of explanation diagrammatically, representing the typical explanation of each type by a point and the rough boundaries of each class by circles:



This means of representation will lead us to expect, for instance, that the logical differences between a psycho-analytic explanation (E4) and a strictly causal one (E3) will be similar to, though less marked than those between stated or reported reasons (E1 or E2) and E3.

This is what we find, and it is these differences which are a source of much of the mystification about psycho-analysis. The typical psycho-analytic explanation E4 (as presented by an analyst at the end of a series of consultations) has something

in common with each of the other three types of explanation. Firstly, the patient must come to recognise it as a natural (indeed, as *the* natural) expression of his neurotic state of mind: it must, that is, provide him with a plausible 'stated motive'. Secondly, third parties who are familiar with the case-history must accept it as a description of his conduct: it must, that is provide a plausible 'reported motive'. Thirdly, such 'facts of early life' as it invokes must be of a kind which could have led to this kind of conduct: the explanation must include a plausible 'causal history' of the neurosis.

It is not essential, however, that the 'causal history' should refer only to authentic facts, and this distinguishes psycho-analysis from other types of investigation. A psycho-analytic explanation may be accepted (provisionally, at any rate) as 'correct', even though the 'facts' cited as causes never occurred.<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in the analyst's procedure. He is largely indifferent to what independent witnesses have to say about his patient's early life: what the patient himself says about it is what counts. In this respect the psycho-analytic explanation (E4) resembles an account of *motives* (such as E1 or E2) rather than one of *causes* (such as E3). An explanation in terms of a 'fantasy-trauma' is, however, less satisfactory than one in terms of authenticated facts and, if its fictitious nature is detected by the analyst, it can be accepted only as provisional, and eventually comes to be regarded as a symptom on its own account. Where there is a choice, the fantasy is rejected, shewing that the difference between E4 and E3 is less marked than that between E1 or E2 and E3.

It is this continuity of E4 with the other three types of explanation of conduct which gives us grounds for regarding the techniques of psycho-analysis as potentially 'rational', in a way in which hypnotic suggestion, brain surgery and insulin-treatment cannot be. The kernel of Freud's discovery is the introduction of a technique in which the psycho-therapist begins by studying the *motives for*, rather than the *causes of* neurotic behaviour. It is illuminating to regard his early 'law of dream-interpretation' ("Every dream is the fulfilment of a suppressed wish") as a methodological reminder, rather than as an empirical generalisation, rewording it as "It's the *motive for* dreaming that matters to the psycho-therapist".

<sup>1</sup> "Few episodes in the history of scientific research provide a more dramatic test of true genius than the occasion on which Professor Freud made the devastating discovery that many of the traumas to which he had been *obliged to attach aetiological significance* had never occurred outside the imagination of the patients," Ernest Jones, Preface to Freud's *Collected Papers*. (My italics.)



There need be nothing mysterious, either, about the therapeutic success of psycho-analysis. Firstly, the technique can be regarded as an extension of the more familiar technique of giving 'reasons' for actions—a technique which, as we saw, is itself to be understood in connection with the satisfaction of the agent's desires. Secondly, if a fully-fledged analytic explanation is not a part of a successful cure, we do not regard it as a 'correct' explanation: therapeutic failure is as fatal to an explanation in psycho-analysis as predictive failure is to an explanation in physics.

Once the distinction between the typically causal explanation (E3) and the analytic one (E4) is appreciated, the deterministic worry also loses much of its bite. A man who can give in detail his reasons for acting as he does is (roughly speaking) the one whose conduct we should regard as least 'determined'. The success of psycho-analysis, so far from destroying the last grounds—or loop-hole, if you prefer it—for belief in free-will, should re-emphasise the importance of 'reasons for action', as opposed to 'causes of action', and so the possibility of free choice. Indeed, as a practical technique, psycho-analysis already provides a means of judging the *degree* of freedom involved in a particular action—how far it was consciously planned, and how far it was compulsive. It may indeed be true, as Freud claimed, that psycho-analysis does more than hypnosis or insulin to reveal "the play of mental forces", but these 'forces' are as much akin to the 'reasons' for a decision as they are to the 'stresses' in a machine: they are as much the 'motives' as the 'motive-power' behind our behaviour.

## CERTAIN PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH THE DEFINITIONS OF IDENTITY AND OF DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS GIVEN IN PRINCIPIA MATHEMATICA

By SÖREN HALLDÉN

### I

IN the following I shall discuss three difficulties, concerning two definitions, and a theorem of Principia Mathematica. Beside the ordinary concepts of logic I will employ strict implication, and a certain relation of awareness.

Strict implication holds from a proposition  $p$  to a proposition  $q$  if it is logically necessary that  $q$  is true if  $p$  is so. That is,  $p$

strictly implies  $q$  if the proposition :  $p \supset q$ , is logically necessary.

The relation of awareness I shall use is such that whenever a subject is aware of  $y$ , the whole of  $y$  belongs to the content of this awareness. Thus I may be thinking about Walter Scott without being aware of the author of 'Waverley'. The description, The author of 'Waverley', must belong to the mental content of a thought, if this thought is to be regarded as an awareness of it. The sentence "A is aware of  $y$ " means : The mental content  $y$  is mentally present to A.

## II.

I will now proceed to consider the first of the three difficulties, which concerns the definition of identity of Principia Mathematica. As is well known, this asserts that two objects are identical if they have all their properties in common. This definition may, if interpreted as an analytical definition, be split up into the following two assertions :

- (1) The proposition :  $x$  and  $y$  are identical, entails the proposition :  $x$  and  $y$  have all their properties in common.
- (2) The proposition :  $x$  and  $y$  have all their properties in common, entails the proposition :  $x$  and  $y$  are identical.

The usual objection to this definition is to deny the truth of assertion (2). There is, however, and this is what I intend to show here, also some reason to believe that assertion (1) is false.

In its proper formulation the definition asserts :

$$x=y.=(f).fx \supset fy$$

It must be incorrect if there is an  $x, y$  and  $f$  such that

1.  $x=y$
2.  $fx$
3.  $\sim fy$

However, there must be some person A such that the following three propositions are true :

- A1. The property of being a brother of somebody, is identical with the property of being a male sibling of somebody.
- A2. A is aware of : the property of being a brother of somebody.
- A3. It is not the case that A is aware of : the property of being a male sibling of somebody.

Also, these propositions seem to be correct :

- B1. Walter Scott is identical with the author of 'Waverley'.
- B2. The proposition : The author of 'Waverley' wrote 'Ivanhoe', strictly implies the proposition : Somebody wrote 'Waverley'.

B3. It is not the case that the proposition: Walter Scott wrote 'Ivanhoe' strictly implies the proposition: Somebody wrote 'Waverley'.

Therefore the definition in question is incorrect.<sup>1</sup>

I will now suggest two solutions, which make it possible to save the definition.

(1) It may be argued that the two properties mentioned in A1, the property of being a brother of somebody, and the property of being a male sibling of somebody, are not identical with the properties with the same names occurring in A2 and A3, and that the objects: the author of Waverley, and, Walter Scott, mentioned in B1, are not identical with the objects with the same names mentioned in B2 and B3.

This explanation may be coupled with a general theory asserting that terms of the natural languages usually have a double meaning, and at the same time denote two different types of entities, 'real' objects and 'conceptual complexes'. According to this theory, there is one real author of 'Waverley', and one conceptual complex; the author of 'Waverley', which are both denoted by the same term: 'the author of Waverley'. This theory can be linked up with Frege's theory of 'Sinn' and 'Bedeutung', and with Carnap's theories in *Meaning and Necessity*.

(2) According to the other solution, the concept of functional variable employed in Principia is reinterpreted. The variable ' $f$ ' occurring in ' $(f).fx \supset fy$ ', is interpreted as referring only to a special kind of attribute which we may call 'properties'.

The distinction between attributes in general and properties seems rather obvious. While entities such as the attribute of being thought of, and the attribute of being spoken about, only belong to the former category, other attributes, such as those of being red, of being an electron or of being a state of consciousness, also belong to the other less inclusive category. This distinction may now be employed, and the range of the ' $f$ ' in the definiens restricted to the category of properties.

The definition of identity will then no longer be incompatible with the two sets of propositions, A1-A3, or B1-B3.

If modal concepts are employed it may be possible to define the concept of property in this way (' $N(p)$ ' means:  $p$  is logically necessary):

$f$  is a property =  $N((x, y) : x=y. \supset fx=fy)$

<sup>1</sup> Related matters have been treated by Carnap in *Meaning and Necessity*, pp. 33-54, and by Quine in *The Problem of Interpreting Modal Logic*, J.S.L., 12:2, 1947, pp. 46-47.

A weakness, however, of this solution is the difficulty in applying the concept of property. Even if the suggested definition were correct, it would be very difficult to decide whether many attributes are properties or not.

### III.

I shall now turn to the second of the three difficulties. This concerns the definition of definite descriptions in *Principia Mathematica*. This definition implies the proposition:

$$f(iy)(gy) \supset (Ey).gy$$

asserting that if the object which is  $f$  is  $g$ , there must be some object which is  $g$ . The definition is incorrect if there are two true propositions of the following type:

1.  $f(iy)(gy)$
2.  $\sim(Ey).gy$

It seems to me, however, that there must be some person A such that

C1. A is aware of: The centaur called 'Cheiron'.

C2. It is not the case that there is a centaur called 'Cheiron'.

Further these two assertions must be admitted as true:

D1. The proposition: The centaur called 'Cheiron' had a beard, materially implies the proposition: Somebody has a beard.

D2. It is not the case that there is a centaur called 'Cheiron'.

Two solutions similar to those above may be suggested which are able to save the definition:

(1) One is to distinguish between the real object:  $(iy)(gy)$ , and the conceptual complex:  $(iy)(gy)$ , to interpret the definition only as a definition of the former, and to deny that C1 and D1 are about the kind of definite descriptions defined. According to this solution C1 and D1 are only about the conceptual complex; The centaur called 'Cheiron', and not about the real object: The centaur called 'Cheiron'. Then, neither C1-C2, nor D1-D2, are incompatible with the definition.

(2) Just as solution (1) of our second difficulty is similar to solution (1) of our first difficulty, so solution (2) of our second difficulty is similar to solution (2) of our first difficulty. The definition of definite descriptions may be independent of the two pairs of propositions, C1-C2, D1-D2, if the functional variable occurring in it is interpreted as referring only to properties, and not to attributes in general. The two attributes, A is aware of  $y$ , and; The proposition;  $y$  has a beard, materially implies the proposition: Somebody has a beard—do not belong to the category of properties.

## IV.

It remains to consider the third of the three difficulties. This is less refractory than the other two. The reason for this is that while A1-A3, B1-B3, C1-C2 and D1-D2 are evidently and undoubtedly true, the corresponding propositions here have only a certain degree of probability.

The difficulty has to do with the logical theorem :

$f x. g x. \supset (E y) : f y. g y$

Together with true propositions such as :

The author of 'Waverley' wrote several books

A is aware of : The author of 'Waverley'

The proposition : The author of Waverley wrote 'Ivanhoe',  
materially implies the proposition : Somebody wrote 'Ivanhoe'

It implies propositions like :

$(E y) : y$  wrote several books. A is aware of  $y$

$(E y) : y$  wrote several books. The proposition :  $y$  wrote 'Ivanhoe',  
materially implies the proposition : Somebody wrote 'Ivanhoe'

quaint propositions, which are unlikely to be correct.

Similar solutions can be suggested for this third dilemma. It may be the case that the term 'the author of Waverley' should be regarded as having two different meanings. Further it may be suggested that the logical principle discussed is only correct if ' $f$ ' and ' $g$ ' are given a more restricted interpretation.

The problem of the correct solution still remains, but on this I have nothing to say. My object above has merely been to state certain logical difficulties and to mention a few possible solutions.

Upsala : Sweden.

#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTIONS

The attention of readers is drawn to the note on contributions on the back cover. It is hoped that continued support for ANALYSIS may make possible one or two enlarged numbers during this year and that increased support will enable this to be extended to all future numbers. This will allow the occasional publication of articles on points which require not less than 4,000—5,000 words for their development. So that although, in general, short articles will continue to be preferred, longer articles may be submitted and will be considered as space permits.



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